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## **Embodied care and Planet Earth: Ecofeminism, maternalism and post-maternalism**

### **Abstract**

The article engages with Julie Stephens (2011) book, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking*, which argues for a 'regendered' feminism to counter the current postmaternal and neoliberalist focus on paid work to the detriment of relationships of care. Stephens points to ecofeminism as illustrative of a potentially new form of maternalism which could achieve this. While broadly agreeing with Stephens's diagnosis of neoliberalism as amplifying the impoverishment of relations within natural and societal worlds, I contest her construal of ecofeminism and care ethics to maternalism. Instead, I propose a concept of embodied care that speaks to the ecofeminist imperative to support a radical restructuring of social and political institutions such that they focus on more-than-human flourishing. This is not to argue for a form of regendered maternalism, but neither does it seek to cast maternalism as something to be transcended. Rather, an approach to care that foregrounds connectivity and entangled materialisations provides an ethical resource to confront the dead hand of neoliberalism and a starting place from which to re-figure the postmaternal through a radical and liberatory focus on embodied relatedness.

**Key words:** care ethics, maternalism, ecofeminism, embodiment, relatedness.

### **Introduction**

Contesting the social and ecological crises amplified by neoliberalism's focus on atomistic individualism requires ethical resources that empower us to imagine and act on alternatives. In her 2011 book, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking*, Julie Stephens offers a diagnosis of

the problem and a potential solution. Stephens defines the postmaternal as a current sense of antagonism associated with 'maternal' values such as nurture, care, protection and dependency and the ways in which such ideals, which Stephens associates with practices of mothering, are disavowed in the public sphere and conflicted in the private. She points to what she regards as an 'increasingly widespread cultural unease, if not hostility, toward certain expressions of the maternal and maternalist political perspectives in general' (Stephens 2011, ix). Stephens argues that postmaternalism colludes with neoliberalist processes which celebrate the self-identical, autonomous and self-sufficient individual and which are disquieted by notions regarding vulnerability or emotional connectedness.

For Stephens, those versions of feminism that strove to achieve gender-neutrality in the name of equality not only failed to challenge neoliberal policies, but were implicated in a neoliberalist focus on paid work to the detriment of relationships of care.<sup>i</sup> Thus Stephens argues for a 'regendered' feminism that takes up and revalues notions of care and nurturing and points to ecofeminism as a potential way forward. Ecofeminism has been developed in response to the ways in which 'woman', other subordinated groups (for example: the aged, differently abled, ethnic minorities) and 'nature' are conceptually linked in Western thought, such that processes of inferiorization have been mutually reinforcing. Ecofeminist philosophy has sought to instate care as a means of engaging publics and individuals with the ecological and social challenges with which we are faced, and as a social, political and moral resource from which to motivate action. This paper, however, was born out of a sense of frustration, not with Stephens's confrontation with postmaternalism as an expression of neoliberalism, but the way in which she portrays ecofeminist philosophy and activism as illustrative of a new form of maternalism which could provide a means to point to and correct what she perceives as the limitations of a degendered feminism.

Indeed, there is much to agree with in Stephens's linked critiques of neoliberalism and postmaternalism. It is increasingly evident from programmes of austerity and the retreat of

the welfare state that humans, whether mothers or not, are valued only if they are economically productive, self-sufficient, self-responsible and entrepreneurial. The withdrawal of state support for those with caring responsibilities, the poor, the sick, children or the aged – all those who are unproductive – is justified by claims that such support produces unaffordable and morally questionable dependencies. The provision of caring and nurturing services is seen as the responsibility of the individual and available through the operation of the market through processes of commodification and marketization that continue to under-value its contribution.

Similar trends of marketization, the maximization of economic utility and a focus on individual responsibility are evident in neoliberalist treatments of nature also. Castree (2008) argues that ever greater areas of the natural world are falling subject to neoliberal practices. Some of these practices make claims to the effective conservation of the natural environment through privatisation and marketization, through seeking opportunities for growth by developing new, 'greener', products or technologies, or through making win-win eco-efficiencies (see also Murphy 2000). Nature, it is claimed, will thus be preserved by integrating environmental issues within current business and economic priorities. Castree (2008) also points out that many neoliberal measures and policies are undertaken that have no ecological motivations but are simply about the biophysical world being used as a means to the end of capital accumulation and that such policies can seek actively to degrade natural resources to generate profit and disregard environmental or social consequences. Seyfang (2005), meanwhile, argues that the discourses of sustainability and environment often adopted by governments and also by some environmental NGOs place an onus on the individual citizen to change their lifestyle by, for example, conserving energy, consuming less and recycling more or reducing car use (see also Dobson 2009; MacGregor 2014; Shove and Walker 2010) in a movement that mirrors that of a state retreat from the public provision of welfare and a focus on the self-sufficient citizen and sovereign consumer. However, ecological degradation, a reduction of 52 per cent in global wildlife populations

between 1970 and 2010 that can only be described as a genocide of animal life (World Wildlife Fund 2014) as well as the threats posed by climate change continue apace. Neoliberalizing processes amplify the impoverishment of our relations within natural and societal worlds, and we are led to ignore more-than-human interconnections and interdependencies. As a result, we are tearing apart the fabric of the planet.

To challenge neoliberal thinking, but *contra* Stephens, I propose a concept of care that expresses embodied compassion and emotions that encompass, but are not reduced to, maternalism and which takes account of more-than-human connectivities. The term 'more-than-human' has become currency across disciplines and in a plethora of debates around the ontological and epistemological status of 'nature' wherein a central focus is placed on materiality, the 'thingness' of things and the matter of matter (eg Barad 2003, Whatmore 1999, 2002, 2004). Probyn (2014) suggests that this is related to increasing anxiety at the impacts of human activity which have become so far-reaching that our current age is said to be a new era; the Anthropocene. This is allied to a growing awareness of the interconnectivity and complexity of all lives and life-forms. At the same time, Gibson Graham (2011) points to the exciting possibilities opened up by re-thinking forms of belonging and subjectivities; from being part of a larger planetary family suggesting an affect of love and ethic of care, to our constitution as co-beings in a 'a vital pluriverse, suggesting an affect of uncertain excitement and an ethic of attuning ourselves more closely to the powers, capacities and dynamism' of our co-habiting companions (Gibson Graham 2011, 3). My use of 'more-than-human' thus draws on Probyn's recognition of the need to capture 'the diverse and shifting relationships between and among humans and the many different aspects of the non-human' (2014, 593). It recognises 'the essential role of the nonhuman in the human' (Bennett 2010, 152) and it attests to Haraway's recognition that our materiality is entangled with that of our co-beings:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 90 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 10 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with* many. (Haraway 2008, 3-4, emphasis in original)

The concept of care I propose is politicised and speaks to the ecofeminist imperative to support a transformative agenda that campaigns for a radical restructuring of social and political institutions focused on more-than-human flourishing. This foregrounds an anti-anthropocentric concern to displace 'the hubris of humanism so as to admit others into the calculus of the world' (Braun 2004, 273). I therefore position ecofeminist care not as a form of 'regendered maternalism' (Stephens 2011) but neither does it seek to cast maternalism as something to be transcended. I suggest that this is how the postmaternal could be reconfigured; as a way of reconceptualising relationships that does not rely on 'feminine' maternal models but which stresses a 'feminist' approach to connection, embodiment and emotion that is equally valued in both personal and political spheres. Borgerson (2007) sees the difference thus: feminine ethics is centred on essentialising, trait-based ethical positions associated with women's 'natural' propensities. Feminist ethics 'calls attention to relationships, responsibility and experience and their cultural, historical and psychological contexts' (Borgerson 2007, 479) such that these concerns exceed women's oppressions and encompass all who are impacted by exclusionary or subordinating processes and practices. Thus an ecofeminist notion of embodied care is developed as a social and political as well as individual practice necessary to bring about radical changes in our relationships in a more-than-human world.

I develop my argument as follows. First, I outline the main imperatives of ecofeminism which include a challenge to the excessive claims made for rationality as the ground for disembodied and transcendent universal truths. Neoliberalism has, as I will show, amplified the tendency for the subject to be cast as a rationally self-optimising, atomised individual and this has resulted in a disengagement with relational and embodied aspects of being. I then turn to Stephens's call for maternalism, and care ethics, to be regendered; a development which she can discern in contemporary ecofeminism. This is important not only because it is a misconstrual of much ecofeminist work, but because allying ecofeminism and care ethics to maternalism is, as I shall demonstrate, a high risk and limiting strategy. Having set the context, I then come to the main contribution of the paper which is to develop an ecofeminist concept of embodied, care sensitive ethics and practices in which 'mothering' is not transcended but neither does it ground itself in maternalism expressed as practices of mothering. Caring is instead expressed as a recognition of our entangled materialities, the ways in which the matter of the more-than-human is interconnected, and about 'responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part' (Barad 2007, 393). This provides an ethical resource to confront the dead hand of neoliberalism and a starting place from which to re-figure the postmaternal through a radical and liberatory focus on embodied care.

### **Ecofeminism, neoliberalism and maternalism**

Before turning to how ecofeminism can engage with notions of care that emphasis embodiment rather than maternalism, it is worth delineating the elements that broadly comprise an ecofeminist philosophy. I will then outline how neoliberalism has amplified the privileging of rationality over emotion that ecofeminism in general, and ecofeminist care ethics in particular, seeks to challenge.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late 1970s building on women's experiences of direct action; in particular, protesting the use of nuclear technologies in energy generation and weapons. It

was also a response to what was perceived as a masculine bias in existing environmental philosophies and activist groups. Covering a range of issues, such as toxic waste, deforestation, reproductive rights and technologies and animal liberation, ecofeminism has always combined activism and philosophy, developing ecological and social theory in a range of disciplines over the social sciences and humanities.<sup>ii</sup> Ecofeminists largely reject a reformist or incrementalist approach that assumes that any changes in policy and lifestyle required to address mounting environmental and social problems can be achieved within present socio-economic structures (Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien 2005). Instead, it upholds a transformative agenda that will bring about more radical change and to this end, has initiated and supported social and political action that involves those outside the centres of power.

Ecofeminism has been described as a patchwork quilt (Warren 2000) that encompasses a range of issues and views (Cuomo 2002), but common to all is the argument that systemic injustices such as colonialism, racism, sexism and the subordination of nature are interwoven and cross-cutting (Cudworth 2005; Glazebrook 2005; Plumwood 1993; Warren 2000). Striving for new connectivities of care, responsibility and justice therefore has to be extended to natural *and* social realms as they are bound in the same systems of oppression and cannot be addressed in an atomistic way (Lahar 1991). These injustices are grounded in 'patriarchal logic' (Plumwood 1993) expressed through sets of interrelated and hierarchical dualisms, such as mind/body, reason/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine or human/nature, that support a 'culturally exalted hegemonic ideal' of masculinity (Kheel 2008, 3). The privileging of the first terms in these dualisms expresses what can be regarded as authentically human/masculine and this is defined as superior and in opposition to the natural, physical or biological realm. Idealised masculinity *qua* humanity transcends this realm, while women, nature and all else that do not conform are 'othered' to confirm and justify their subordination. Thus a genuinely human self is one that is essentially rational, disembodied and sharply differentiated from that which is associated with, for example,



emotions, bodies and nature which are construed as inferior and given instrumental value only (Phillips 2015).

For ecofeminists, the privileging of rationality within these systems of oppression has led to the suppression of ecocentric perspectives and values and has resulted in a patriarchal culture which 'looks but doesn't see, acts but doesn't feel, thinks but doesn't know' (Kheel 1993, 257). Instead rationality 'has liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral and religious insight' (Horkheimer 1947/1974, 18). Plumwood has termed the ecological crisis with which we are faced a 'crisis of rationality, morality and imagination' (Plumwood 2002, 98) and points to:

...the familiar view of reason and emotion as sharply separated and opposed, and of 'desire,' caring, and love as merely 'personal' and 'particular' as opposed to the universality and impartiality of understanding and of 'feminine' emotions as essentially unreliable, untrustworthy, and morally irrelevant, an inferior domain to be dominated by a superior, disinterested (and of course masculine) reason. (Plumwood 1991, 5)

Ecofeminism thus provides a jumping-off point for re-envisioning relations within the more-than-human in a way that values care, emotion and embodiment.

The rationality to which Plumwood refers has been amplified through processes of neoliberalism that currently dominate economic and political thinking. Neoliberalism is a complex and often contradictory set of practices, best described as sets of processes of neoliberalisation that vary through time and geography rather than a fixed ideology (Larner 2003). However, broadly speaking, the neoliberal agenda argues that the interests of society are best served by the individual maximisation of self-interest, which is most effectively achieved through the operation of the market and devolution of regulatory authority. The role

of the state is focused on ensuring that prevailing conditions are conducive for deregulation, the expansion of markets and the privatisation of assets (Dowling and Harvie, 2014). The moral qualities of subjects, presumed to pursue personal material advantage *ad infinitum*, are based on their ability to rationally assess the costs and benefits of proposed acts such that there is a congruence between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor. This choice of action is 'an expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them' (Lemke 2001, 201). The criterion of economic efficiency resulting in economic prosperity thus becomes closely linked with personal and moral well-being and with individual freedom. It is this focus on individualism and the pursuit of individual advantage, where the needs of other living beings are disregarded, that an embodied ethics of care seeks to counter.

Moreover, such a focus produces the ideal and idealised individual as a disembodied and disengaged subject 'free and rational to the extent that he [sic] has fully distinguished himself from the natural and social worlds' such that 'the subject withdraws from his own body, which he is able to look on as an object' (Taylor 1995, 7). As a result, and particularly in the Global North, humans have become emotionally and physically distanced from the ways in which our<sup>iii</sup> actions impact on nature, on ourselves and on other humans, an alienation that Claire Colebrook links to the lack of 'panic, [or] any apparent, affective comportment that would indicate that anyone really feels or fears [the threat of climate change]' (Colebrook 2011, 53). The ecofeminist project challenges dualistic thinking that privileges rationality and rational ways of knowing in order to redress the physical, emotional and moral alienation and disconnection from nature that are its outcome.

For Stephens (2011), a means must be found to resist neoliberalist and postmaternal thinking. She argues that a feminist maternalism can be reconceptualised through combining maternalism and egalitarianism, by resisting the privatization of motherhood and by

mobilising non-violent activism and an expressive politics that draws on heightened gendered symbols of motherhood or female sexuality. This is underpinned by Sara Ruddick's notion of maternal thinking; a form of moral attentiveness and reasoning judgement that develops from the practices of mothering expressed as the loving relationship between two unequal partners. Stephens believes that resistance is already growing evidenced by the increasing numbers of maternal advocacy groups, particularly those operating through social media. These range from, for example, Mumsnet in the United Kingdom, who offer a platform for shared parenting advice and policy formulation around family issues, to CODEPINK, an anti-war coalition of mothers in the United States. She acknowledges the tensions apparent in such groups' recognition and communication of the value of motherhood which often fail to challenge dominant cultural understandings around family, work and the values promoted by the market. Indeed, she notes that motherhood can be celebrated as an identity decoupled from the everyday care of babies and children. I would argue that Stephens's critiques of such online campaigners and activists do not go far enough as many have a poor record of, for example, challenging cuts to welfare that affect poor women and the 'othering' of single mothers in stark contrast to the glamorization of celebrity mothers in the popular media (Littler 2013; McRobbie 2015).

In the final chapter of her book, Stephens turns to ecofeminism and ecofeminist activism, where she sees possibilities for meaningful engagement with a reinvigorated 'feminist maternalism' (Stephens 2011, 143). She sees ecofeminist work on care ethics as a theoretically informed re-gendering through examining the intersections between feminism, environmentalism and peace politics. She refers briefly to the work of Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Jean Tronto (among others) but seemingly without much appreciation of the very different approaches taken by such scholars. Tronto, for example, eschews linkages between maternalism and care. She also points to Gloria Orenstein's idea of 'the femivore', where an ethic of care for children and the environment is expressed through a focus on home and community (raising chickens, making jam and growing organic vegetables) in acts

of shared resistance to consumer capitalism. She recognises the ‘uncomfortable ideological associations that hark back to the gender politics of the 1950s’ (Stephens 2011, 139) that such ideas might raise but contrasts this with the pressures on mothers to return to work after childbirth that are captured through images of corporate-sponsored breast pumping. However, while Orenstein is recognised as an ecofeminist scholar (see Sturgeon 1997 for an overview and critique of her work), the link to ecofeminism more broadly is not well made and indeed, a construal of ecofeminist care ethics as grounded in maternalism, whether reinvigorated or not, is a mis-reading of ecofeminist work. Leading ecofeminist thought around care such as the work of Deane Curtin (1991), Greta Gaard (1993), Marti Kheel (1993), Val Plumwood (1993) or Karen Warren (2000) does not refer to ‘mothering as a paradigm of political and social care’ (Stephens 2011, 141). Niamh Moore, whose work Stephens cites in support of her claim that it is time for feminism to move beyond the impasse created by accusations of essentialism, rejects the disavowal of maternalism or motherhood as incompatible with feminist activism but equally resists the reduction of ecofeminism to maternalism. Moore found no evidence that maternalist discourses were dominant among the peace camp activists she studied but instead sees such camps as ‘sites of struggle over the meaning of woman and the practice of eco/feminist politics, where the meanings of woman, and eco/feminism, are not just reified but are also refigured’ (Moore 2008, 294). Other ecofeminist thinkers explicitly warn against linking ecofeminism with maternalism. For example, ecofeminist political theorist Sherilyn MacGregor calls for a ‘*properly political* ecofeminism’ that eschews ‘rhetorics rooted in fixed and privatized feminized identities that are themselves depoliticised (for example maternalism)’ (2014, 630, emphasis in original. See also MacGregor 2006). Thus, while Stephens could perhaps argue that ecofeminism resists a purported directive to ‘leave motherhood behind’ as ecofeminism does not seek to exclude any group that is oppressed by patriarchal structures, it is difficult to claim that it builds its programme on a maternalist platform.

The history of ecofeminism offers one explanation as to why some ecofeminists might wish to avoid an association with maternalism, howsoever it could be reconfigured. From the turn of the century, ecofeminist voices became relatively muted, and according to some (eg Moore 2008; Sturgeon 1997; Thompson 2006; Twine 1997), silenced by accusations of essentialism, often originating from other feminists. Critics claimed that ecofeminism celebrated a special affinity between women and nature based in biologically-determined and embodied experiences of, for example, childbirth or menstruation. Care and nurturing were, therefore, 'womanly' values expressive of what was disparagingly termed a form of motherhood environmentalism (Thompson 2006, 506; Sandilands 1999). This, it was argued, was supportive of and colluded with patriarchal ideas where the association of the maternal, the polluting body and the emotional with women provides the explanation for inherent female inferiority. Similarly dismissive claims were made against ecofeminist explorations of human/animal relations while ecofeminist versions of earth-based spirituality were labelled as goddess-worship (see Gaard 2011 for a full discussion). Moreover, critics claimed that such positions ignored the complexity of women's experiences which are mediated by intersections of class, ethnicity, sexuality or able-bodiness and that ecofeminism was a white women's movement that ignored women of colour. Gaard (2011) has comprehensively rebutted such claims, as have Sturgeon (1997) and Moore (2008, 2015), who argue that ecofeminisms are situated in multiple forms of action and theory that contest relations of power and that much of this criticism was unfair, decontextualized and inaccurate. However, the ferocity of the attacks on ecofeminism warn that identification with a programme based in celebrating maternalism is not without risk. As we shall see, approaches to morality based in care have attracted similar critique and it could be strategically unwise, as well as theoretically limiting, for ecofeminism to be identified with a 'new' maternalism. An ecofeminism that makes strong links to relationship and embodiment, however, does provide the ethical and political grounds for resisting the icy grip of neoliberalism and its postmaternal handmaiden.

## **Care, embodiment and the natural world**

I will first outline the general principles of care ethics on which ecofeminists have drawn to develop ways of being in the world that are specifically situated in our relationships both human and more-than-human. I then develop this further as an ecofeminist ethics that values emotion and embodiment and which provides a springboard for action but which is not grounded in maternalism.

An ethics of care begins from an understanding of human interaction such that people are constantly enmeshed in relationships and not seen primarily as rational actors pursuing their own goals and maximising their own interests. Indeed personhood is relational, a becoming-in-the-world-with-others (Price and Shildrick 2002) which is focused on 'a capacity to reshape and cultivate new relations, not to ever more closely resemble the unencumbered abstract rational self of liberal political and moral theories' (Held 2006, 14). While there are different nuances in how care can be defined, I am drawn to Hamington's definition which stresses the embodied dimension to care:

'Care denotes an approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to context, relationships and affective knowledge in a manner that can be fully understood only if care's embodied dimension is recognized. Care is committed to the flourishing and growth of individuals yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence' (Hamington 2004, 3)

This is an ethics that values interdependencies and caring relations that connect persons to one another. It describes a process of making judgements based in context and real, lived experiences and in the constellation of relationships and institutions in which caring is positioned. It recognises specific relations of dependency, responsibility and interconnection as well as respecting the difference and independence of the other.

As a practice it is evident that care underpins human life. All humans and most life-forms require care or give care at some point over their lifespans. Care thus flows through everyday experience and effort and energy is necessary to form and maintain caring relationships such that care is an ongoing process. An ability to care, to experience sympathy, to demonstrate understanding and sensitivity to a situation and to the fate of particular and general others through dynamic, imaginative responses to context and situation is regarded as the hallmark of moral capacity. Qualities such as empathetic responsiveness, emotion, appropriate trust, solidarity and shared concern are to be encouraged and developed rather than rejected as potentially threatening (Held 2006).

For Tronto:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (1993, 103, emphasis in original)

Tronto's delineation of the world as a web of relationships resonates with the ecocentric perspectives that inform ecofeminism. Ecocentrism espouses a view of the world as '... an intrinsically dynamic, interrelated web of relations [with] no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman' (Eckersley 1992, 49). All elements within nature are interconnected and all should be respected because they have intrinsic value. As a holistic philosophy that emphasises respect for the inherent value of individual beings as well as the totality of ecological processes and which is sensitive to the relationships that sustain life (Plumwood 1993), it is appropriate that ecofeminism has drawn on the moral significance of care. For ecofeminism, caring is grounded in an ability to see connections to others who are

different from us, perhaps indifferent to us and not necessarily equal or not equal and is underpinned by a focus on:

values typically unnoticed, underplayed, or misrepresented in traditional ethics (e.g. values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust). These are values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to an understanding of who we are (Warren 2000, 100).

Care is grounded in a practical morality that sees the self not as atomised nor as self-optimising, but as positioned in a web of caring relationships more fulfilling than the narrow pursuit of self-interest. Ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren (2000) argues that care, and the ability to empathise through care, is a moral emotion essential to ethical motivation, deliberation and practice. Ethical action should be located in 'care-sensitive' ethics in which such sensitivity determines how principles such as duty, utility or justice can provide guidance for action. Appropriate principles are those which take into account the extent to which 'care practices' are reflected, created and maintained in a given context. Care practices are those that maintain, promote or enhance the flourishing of relevant parties. Practices that cause unnecessary and avoidable harm to selves and relevant others such as the destruction of the stability, diversity and sustainability of first people's cultures or natural ecosystems such as rainforests, oceans or deserts are not care practices and neither are those that oppress or exploit others or violate their civil rights. Any claim that humans are separate from nature is refuted; humans are biophysical members of an ecological community and, at the same time, different, in some respects, from other members of that community. The attention to relationships and community does not erase difference, but respectfully acknowledges it (Warren 2000).

What is currently largely missing from ecofeminist care ethics is an explicit attention to the embodied aspects of care and I have argued elsewhere that ecofeminism needs to embrace



the body (XXXX) to challenge the ways that nature and emotionality are cast and to begin to reimagine and revalue them. An acceptance of the organic materiality of human bodies, as beings who are part of the natural world, can overcome our estrangement from nature and remind us that our future and wellbeing is inherently entwined with that of the planet.

Hamington points out how the body and embodied experience, learning and imagination combine to develop understandings of interconnection, engagement and relations with others and thus we are empowered to develop care practices (Hamington 2004). The potential for an ethics grounded in care to motivate and inspire political action resides in a capacity for feeling pain at the distress of others and responding imaginatively. Care and compassion enable us to visualise the suffering caused by injustice and to consider how best to ameliorate that. In this way, care is not confined within an impersonal straightjacket of logic and rationality, and neither is it reduced to maternity, but involves 'a complex weaving of imaginative processes with embodied practices' (Hamington 2004, 5). This includes the interplay between mind and body that produces the embodied experiences which enable individuals to develop empathy and the understanding of the other that is often not a product of conscious thought, but which originates in the body. We are moved to act morally through a personal and embodied caring.

Thus attention to the visceral, embodied aspects of care are an imperative so that the current alienation between most of those living in the Global North and the biophysical world can be overcome. A recognition that 'the fleshy, damp immediacy of our own embodied existences' (Neimanis and Walker 2013, 2) is deeply bound up with the impacts of human activity on the planet help to connect the imaginary and the corporeal as entwined in 'a common space, a conjoined time [and] a mutual worlding' (Neimanis and Walker 2013, 3). A re-discovery of our 'earthian' place means becoming aware of and accepting our fleshiness and the frailties of that flesh, as well as recognising the vulnerability of nature. Perception is thus shifted to acknowledge the substantial interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human world. As Alaimo (2008, 238) points out, 'human corporeality in all

its material fleshiness is inseparable from “nature” or “environment” such that embracing the vulnerability of the body is a recognition of precarious, corporeal openness to the material world where the human is not in nature but of nature. Thus we need to reaffirm the visceral sensations and emotions experienced through our bodies to begin to develop the kind of affective, caring engagement with and embodied knowledge of nature and thus of ourselves that might lead us to respond more appropriately to the ecological threats with which humanity is faced.

Embodied experiences combine with a caring imagination to create points of departure for developing responsive interconnections that inform action. For example, I might have a favourite walk through a particular piece of woodland. My relationship with the woodland ecology of animals, trees and plants is formed through corporeal and sensual encounters. I know the different colours of the wood as they change through the seasons, hear the birdsong and rustling of small animals and smell the wood’s damp, leafy perfume. I have been captivated by the patterns made by sunlight through leaves, or the bark of a knarled tree or the discovery of fungus nibbled by a mouse. The breeze has touched my skin too as it ruffles the tree canopy. This is a form of knowing and meaning creation that extends beyond the rational and involves a responsive, emotional engagement with nature which values what ‘cannot be fully articulated according to the demands of objectivity ... knowledge guided by and responsive to the physical environment in which it is practiced’ (Glazebrook 2005, 80). It is a corporeal and affective knowing in and through the body which goes beyond the propositional knowledge generated by gathering facts and information and a means of learning that challenges the excessive claims to universal truths of knowledge grounded in rationality which is disembodied and transcendent (see also Alaimo 2008, 2009). This embodied and situated knowledge can be gained from direct experience of ‘concrete others’ (Benhabib 1992, 164) which facilitates our understanding of at least some of the other’s needs, and, at the same time, underlines the nature of our differences (Porter 2006). The wood with whom I have a relationship is not an abstract entity that is

interchangeable with any other, but has a material presence that develops connection through sympathetic identification. Such experiences build situated knowledge and reasons to care, but they also facilitate making connections between the well-being and flourishing of the particular, including the self, as intimately intertwined with the wellbeing and flourishing of the general (Curtin, 1991; Gaard, 1993; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000). To care about and understand the particular environmental, social and economic struggles of humans and other life forms we must recognise and have some level of understanding of those issues as features of contemporary social structures. To care about and understand such structural features, we must recognise how they exist in particular lives and experiences.

One day, I hear that the woodland is threatened by a road-building programme which will tear down the trees and replace them with a highway. The environmental campaigner George Monbiot has written that we care about the living world because we love it. Acknowledging this love engages the imagination and the intellect and inspires belief in a way that appeals to self-interest or to cold rationality cannot (Monbiot 2015). Thus it is out of love that I will act to try to protect the wood and resist the developers, not out of a rational calculation of the costs and benefits that might accrue to me or to my community. To inform that resistance, I will learn more about the political and economic systems within which road-building is more important than the preservation of natural space. When I hear of other threats to the natural environment, even though they might be places which I have never visited, I will remember how I felt – the trace of those feelings will resonate within my body – and I can imagine how those affected, human and other life forms, will be impacted. Experiencing loss, anger and sadness myself allows me to develop empathy: the response to an other that combines embodied and other forms of knowledge with emotion to enable me to understand the situation of the other. Our capacity to care thus extends beyond our personal experiences to an ability to respond to difference, and to visualise what the other, given their specificity, is undergoing. This pre-supposes a sense of shared vulnerability to suffering and an ability to respond to the other's pain (Alaimo 2009). Equally, we

demonstrate the equal worth of the other by furthering their flourishing. The actions required of us to promote such flourishing can only be discerned by careful attention to and respect for the other's needs and we should make room in ourselves to be moved by the experiences of the other and not just because the other's pain resonates with our own (Porter 2006). In this way, embodied care is not reduced to individual bodily experience but works together with the imagination to allow us to overcome the limitations of individual physical existence and reach out to the other over time, space and difference (Hamington 2004). We can extend care to those with whom we have no direct personal relationship and who are in circumstances that perhaps we have not experienced ourselves but who are part of the web of interconnections in which we are situated; orang-utans threatened by forest fires in Indonesia, the plight of refugees fleeing war or other deprivations or the circumstances of bonded labourers. As Hamington (2004) points out, it is through our imagination that we are moved to care even for fictional characters in books, plays or films and indeed, the imaginative and emotional shifts stimulated by engagement with narrative, whether fictional or based in 'reality', develops and increases the capacity for care (Manning 1992). The concretization of the other also therefore emerges from indirect experience such as through the news or other media and through the vicarious experiences produced through engagement with the arts whether that be fiction, poetry or visual art (Gayá and Phillips 2015, Phillips 2015, 2014). We cannot possibly have full access to the experience of even proximate others, let alone to distant others where that distance is between human and other life forms, but while these accounts often anthropomorphise the actualities of the more-than-human, they challenge us to engage with difference, to see the familiar from a radical perspective, and provide an additional means for encountering and reflecting on the experiences of the other. It is this empathetic act of imagination that allows a move from the personal and known to the wider world and to the unknown as we have to consider how to act in new situations or when faced with unknown others. Both our direct and indirect encounters with the other combine embodied feeling and caring imagination stimulated by active engagement and listening so that we hear and respond to the plight of distant others.

Indeed, for Hamington (2004), it is part of our moral responsibility to seek out experiences that develop embodied understanding and connection with the other. This is a wider, more inclusive, vision on which to build care ethics than a narrow appeal to maternalism.

As noted earlier in this paper, I pointed to the critiques levelled at ecofeminism in which it was claimed that it was an essentialist form of environmentalism that made particular claims for women's innate connection to the earth. Similar minefields are strewn around concepts of care grounded in the relationship between mothers and children which makes any appeal to maternalism a high risk strategy for ecofeminism. The early work of care ethicists such as Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) was interpreted as positioning care as an essentially female practice and disposition because women are more likely to experience care-giving activities and therefore have a greater understanding of and empathy for practices of care. Noddings, in particular, argued that women's orientation to care was shaped by the loving and emotional bonds developed through maternal experience which challenged the concept of a rational, disembodied and detached self. This work was widely criticised for promoting an essentialist view of women, for ignoring the cultural specificities of 'mothering', for failing to take account of the hierarchical nature of mother/child relations and more generally for 'reaffirming a dichotomy between those who care and those cared for' (Beasley and Baachi 2005, 59). In her later work, Gilligan (1995) herself was clear that care should not be labelled a 'feminine' ethic to be associated with essentialised female traits such as passivity, irrationality and, importantly from the perspective of care, a desire to nurture at the expense of the self. Gilligan asserts that 'selflessness or self-sacrifice is built into the very definition of care when caring is premised on an opposition between relationships and self-development' such that an ethic identified with putative feminine traits in a patriarchal order would posit relationships that are fundamentally unequal (Gilligan 1995, 122). A one-sided preoccupation with the flourishing of others is thus deeply problematic particularly when it is premised on the prior assumption that women are 'naturally' able and willing to sacrifice their own needs and development in the interests of others.

It is also the case that caring is usually a socially stratified activity in Western society where the work of care is not only gendered but also raced and classed such that it falls on those who have the least power and voice. Indeed, more recently, it has come to be understood not as a distinctively or exclusively feminine perspective, but as a potential orientation emerging from political or social subordination which includes gender, but also encompasses race, class and other categories (Simola 2010; Skeggs 2014; Tronto 1987). This has been described in positive terms as a strategy of solidarity that helps relatively excluded groups cope with vulnerability and as reflecting a vision for a more compassionate society that might emerge in those groups because of their experiences of oppression. However, care ethics has been critiqued for ignoring such power asymmetries, a concern amplified by Noddings's assertion that becoming better at caring for oneself can be morally justified as it leads to better caring for others. For Hoagland (1991), care could become a one-way-traffic that is fraught with the potential for personal and political danger as it could be used to maintain current divisions of labour; feminist scholarship, for example, has pointed to the 'tyranny of maternity' generated by the repetitive and exhausting daily round of housework and childcare and the ways in which this burden still falls disproportionately on women (McRobbie 2013; Wood and Newton 2006). The emphasis placed on the importance of relationships has therefore prompted some critics to express concern that women and other marginalised groups may be led to prioritise the other at the expense of the self; thus supporting oppressive social constraints placed on women's behaviour in particular.

The counter to such critiques enlarges the focus of care beyond the individual and beyond maternalism as a necessary move to bring about the social and political changes required to reinvigorate more-than-human relationships and to ensure the flourishing of life on this planet. An ecofeminist, embodied ethics of care such as I have outlined points to the potentially liberatory and radical aspects of relatedness and does not ground its argument in a reification of women's 'maternal' propensity to care. It is liberatory because it is available to

men and to women, enabling and empowering all those who are excluded from hegemonic masculinity's construction of the ideal to flourish as a self in relationship. It is radical because, as Curtin (1991) points out, caring must be understood and developed as integral to a wider political agenda which challenges the atomisation of the individual amplified by neoliberalism. Caring thus focuses on a relational sense of self that is nonabusive and nonexploitative, that embraces but does not subsume the difference of the other and which extends care to contexts in the public sphere where it is currently deemed inappropriate. More importantly, it is radical also because it starts to address the challenge of how can we live differently, of finding 'a way of belonging differently in the world' (Gibson-Graham, 2011, 1) that opens up possibilities for re-imagining humanity in ways that are exciting and, more pragmatically, necessary in order to survive at all.

Conceptualising the self as part of a wider web of interconnected selves reduces the risk of falling into a paternalistic trap where there is an asymmetrical relationship between those who are vulnerable, dependent and in need of care, and those who deliver it (Hughes, McKie, Hopkins and Watson 2005), or conversely, that giving care necessarily involves the privileging of the other over the self. This dualistic concept of care has been supported by assumptions that care relationships are exclusively dyadic such as that of mother and child espoused by maternalist thinking. However, Tronto points out that such assumptions are inaccurate and a distortion of care because, to follow the same example, mothers do not provide care alone but childrearing is situated in a complex set of social relationships that includes the wider family, neighbours, health and education services and other carers. Moreover, Tronto argues that the particular bond between mothers and children and its representation as the primary relationship of life is a social construction and one that is relatively recent (Tronto 2013). The capacity to see the self as vulnerable and to recognise that those who receive care and those who give care are the same people undercuts the processes whereby care recipients are viewed as other and, for Tronto, 'forces us to recognize the limits of market life as the metaphor for all human actions' (2013, 151).

So a recognition of the embodiment and vulnerability that are shared by the more-than-human moves the focus of care away from a primary engagement with those deemed to be needy or dependent, such as the maternal relation to a child, to the interdependence of all beings on the planet. It casts care as a process which requires work, but without expecting reciprocation, and which takes place in the intersections between more-than-humans. It foregrounds the interconnections between caring as a set of values and caring as a set of material and embodied practices rather than as a 'thing' which is bestowed by one party on another. Moreover, this process of active caring does not background emotion but emphasises the importance of feeling that is also embodied, and the need to reflect on convictions and feelings. It is thus also distinguished from forms of postmaternity that are antagonistic to embodied experience and emotional connectedness. Active and embodied caring encourage an understanding of self and humanity as part of nature such that we can 'dare to care' (Warren 2000, 212); an essential precursor to political action which could challenge the dominance of neoliberalism. Thus an appeal to maternalism is neither necessary nor desirable in order to emphasise the importance of a caring that is and should be embodied through emotional attachments to animals, landscapes or ecosystems which increase awareness of interdependence and foster action and which signify the need to make nature present in the conscious life of the Global North.

### **Concluding thoughts**

A greater emotional and embodied connectivity with nature, a recognition of our vulnerability and an embracing of the importance of care is part of a more positive imaginary of an ecology of self in relationship with the more-than-human which contrasts with what Ghassan Hage (cited in Beasley and Bacchi 2005) argues is the perception that states and other institutions care for increasingly smaller groups of their 'stakeholders' and see nature only as a resource. The resulting insecurity, hyper-competition and scapegoating of 'others' that results is socially destructive such that it becomes increasingly difficult to care for each other



or for the environment (Beasley and Bacchi 2005). An ecofeminist approach to embodied care is thus a resource to inform political action that can challenge the dominant neoliberalist discourses and practices that are damaging our planet and threatens more-than-human futures. This account of care suggests an alternative to the neoliberalist assumption of an autonomous, atomised and self-optimising individual though a focus on elements such as relationship, emotion and intersubjectivity that neoliberalism and its postmaternal derivatives disregards. The combination of embodied elements of care with affective knowledge fosters compassionate connection that motivates action. Action, experience and understanding are held together in a fluid but self-reinforcing relationship where a philosophy of care and connectedness informs and is informed by action. For Joan Tronto:

Care is a way of framing political issues that makes their impact, and concern with human [and more-than-human] lives, direct and immediate. Within the care framework, political issues can make sense and connect to each other. Under these conditions, political involvement increases dramatically (Tronto 1993, 177)

But to build societies grounded in care will require a reconception of the human self in mutualistic terms – ‘a self-in-relationship with nature, formed not in the drive for mastery and control of the other but in a balance of mutual transformation and negotiation’ (Plumwood 2006, 142). This is based in self-knowledge and an ability to distinguish self-interests from those of others, and a willingness to pay attention to the independence of the other. This is a relationship built on foundations of respect, care and love as we strive to replace more instrumental and mechanistic models that have not served thus far to mitigate disastrous outcomes for the more-than-human. Ecofeminist care could refigure the postmaternal, not by specifically pointing to the relationships between mothers and children as exemplars of care and neither by ‘leaving motherhood behind’ but by building on care for particular others to enhance wider and more generalized concerns and for feeling and understanding the relationships between particular commitments and losses and those of more distant others.

Finally, I hope I have demonstrated that an appeal to maternalism is limiting. An embodied conception of care, grounded in ecofeminist principles, such as I have outlined provides more vibrant, exciting and radical inspiration that is sorely needed if humanity is to reconfigure its place within the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Whether 'equality feminism' is complicit in neoliberalist processes is a debate beyond the scope of this paper. However, see McRobbie (2008), Fraser (2009) and in particular McRobbie (2013) for an interesting discussion on 'new maternity'.

<sup>ii</sup> For a history of ecofeminism, see Sturgeon (1997) and Moore (2015).

<sup>iii</sup> I include myself as a being who dwells in the geographic and cultural space of the Global North. I have no wish to present myself as an objective observer who sits above or apart from the concerns I have outlined.